

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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SIGNS YOU MAY NEED TO RECONSIDER YOUR INSTITUTIONAL AID PROGRAMS AND AWARD POLICY

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Financial aid is an extremely important element of any enrollment management plan. As inflation continues, federal and state aid stagnates and institutions witness downward enrollment trends, it's safe to say that well designed institutional aid programs and targeted award policies will be instrumental to enrollment success.

Most higher education administrators, including presidents and chief financial officers, are not well-versed in the details of financial aid. It is difficult for many to even determine whether they have problems with their financial aid operations. The following are some signs that might indicate issues with the structure of your institutional aid programs and/or financial aid award policy.

Low Conversion Rates

It's a good idea to evaluate the percentage of accepted applicants for admission enrolling at your college. While conversion rates are impacted by many factors, a particularly low conversion rate might indicate that your award policy does not effectively provide access for needy students. Spending more may not be the answer. Restructuring and better targeting scarce institutional aid dollars might help.

Large Receivables

Every institution enrolls some students who are unable or unwilling to pay their bills. Many students with outstanding receivables at the end of the term may be another sign that your financial aid award policy is not effectively meeting financial need. Ensure that your award policy provides *realistic* financial aid packages that make it possible for families to cover net charges.

Dismissals for Outstanding Balances

Along the same lines, keep an eye on the number of students dismissed or ineligible to re-enroll due to outstanding balances. This is another sign that packaging policies may be ineffective.

Increasing Institutional Aid Costs

While increases in institutional aid costs are not always a source of concern, you should be concerned if such increases exceed the rate of inflation. In most cases, your costs should increase below the rate of inflation. Be deliberate in how you calculate tuition, room and board annual increases into your financial aid packaging policy.

Unpredictable Expenditure Levels

The brightest red flag when it comes to financial aid is an inability to accurately predict institutional aid costs each cycle. The ultimate budget for institutional aid each year should be set at the beginning of the cycle. Any expenditure surprises at the start of the term are a sign of design shortcomings.

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Dismantling The Department of Education

The Trump Administration enacted a series of severe cuts to the Department of Education, including laying off nearly half of the agency's workforce.

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Large Refunds

Keep your eye on the amount of refunds generated for currently enrolled students. I have worked with some private colleges and universities refunding literally hundreds of thousands of dollars to students. This is a sign that your award policy may be overly generous.

Financial Aid is critical to successful enrollment management, but it is complicated and often misunderstood by key administrators. If you have any doubts about your current level of expenditure; if you are concerned that your merit and need-based institutional aid programs are not effectively supporting your recruitment and retention efforts; if you have experienced cycles where aid costs have exceeded budgeted expectations, then consider conducting a comprehensive review of your financial aid operation. The design and parameters of your institutional scholarships and grants must be periodically reviewed to meet your current needs and evolving market conditions.

HOW TO SHOWCASE YOUR CAMPUS CULTURE IN A WAY THAT RESONATES WITH PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

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When you think about your time at college, what comes to mind?

Most likely, it's not the process of applying for financial aid, scheduling classes, or taking tests. Although these aspects of the college experience tend to occur no matter which institution you attend, they're not necessarily *memorable*. In other words, they're not what we think of most fondly when we look back on "our college years."

Instead, what you probably remember are the friends you made, the events you went to, the clubs you joined, and the teams you cheered. From the cozy quirks of old campus

buildings and the epic sports rivalries that exhilarated the whole school to the countless hours you spent studying and socializing at the local libraries, restaurants, and coffee shops that came to feel like home, your college experience was marked by an immersion in the unique culture of that specific place and time. While it was uniquely yours, it is also warmly relatable to your peers and alumni in a manner that helps you all feel connected for life.

Campus life is one of the most significant differentiators in a student's college experience, but also one of the hardest to quantify. Let's look at some ways you can effectively convey your school's culture to prospective students and give them a powerful sense of what it would feel like to be part of your college community.

Show How You Help Students Feel Welcome from Day One

For some students, getting started at college can feel exciting, but for others it can feel intimidating or overwhelming. In any case, students in a new environment will be seeking two things: a sense of safety and predictability so they can get their bearings and feel confident about exploring, and the freedom to be themselves while finding their own ways to fit in.

To alleviate their worries, help prospects understand what services, events, and processes are in place to help them quickly get acclimated to their new surroundings. What's involved in orientation? Are there icebreaker events for students living on campus, as well as for commuters who might feel socially disconnected? How easy is it to figure out campus logistics like parking and WIFI and start meeting people? Likewise, if someone is more introverted, where are the calm spaces on campus where they can feel free to sit, study, read, relax, or otherwise just "be" without feeling obliged to overextend themselves before they're ready?

"A Day in the Life"

Many aspects of what we think of as "college life" are only revealed as the result of daily, weekly, and semester-long routines that require time and immersion to truly absorb and appreciate. While a new prospect can't fully experience those routines even during a campus visit, you can give them a sense of what they could look forward to by walking them through a day in the life of a first-year student in their chosen major. What buildings and facilities will they be spending time in? How might their day be structured, and which parts of campus would they

be traveling between? Which sections of the library are they most likely to use? Which clubs and extracurricular activities are they interested in, and where do those groups meet?

These “day in the life” simulations, whether done in-person or online via interactive maps or even drone flythroughs, give prospects a physical sense of the spaces they’ll be moving through, the places they’ll be spending time, and the sights, sounds, and other sensory stimuli that will shape their day-to-day experience on campus. They also provide opportunities to see and interact with campus features outside their current major or area of interest, which introduces them to the thrill of juxtaposition and serendipity that can spark new ideas and create unexpected friendships, all because of their proximity to new people and experiences.

Plenty of Ways for Students to Get Involved — at Their Own Speed

Whether a student is a social butterfly or a shy introvert, they’ll want to find “their people” and “their interests” on campus. Which clubs and organizations are open to new members, and how can new students get involved? What intramural sports can they play? What volunteer opportunities do they have? Are there any cool projects happening on campus in terms of art, esports, environmental conservation, community outreach, campus ministries, open mic nights, and other small group activities where prospects could lend their time and talent?

Shared Knowledge is the Key to Getting Ahead

For students seeking advice and mentorship from advisors or peers, what clubs, societies, and other information-sharing options do they have for their major? Being able to connect with older students who can give them tips on navigating the curriculum or course selection can be very helpful in fostering a sense of community within their field of study. Likewise, connecting with instructors and advisors who can offer real-world advice on career preparation and talent development can be a game changer for a student’s personal network and their professional journey.

Traditions

Perhaps the most universally celebrated part of college life are the unique traditions that only happen at *your* school. What are the songs, chants, jokes, rituals, holidays, superstitions, and other “it only happens here” aspects that

interweave to form the one-of-a-kind tapestry of your college culture? These are the touchstones that create a true sense of belonging, which every student desires.

And while you may know about the most obvious ones that typically involve the entire school or campus, it’s also helpful to be aware of the smaller traditions that may happen at the individual major, building, dorm, or classroom level. That way, if a prospect asks you what sets your school apart from others who offer a similar curriculum, you can not only point out the benefits of your professors, technologies, and facilities, but also your college’s very specific cultural habits, customs, and quirks that they won’t find anywhere else.

How Much Power Do Students Have to Create Change?

While traditions offer a meaningful connection to your college’s history, a living community is all about *now*. With that in mind, how easy is it for today’s students to create something new that they will feel is their unique — and maybe even necessary — contribution to your college culture and to the community at large? Which new clubs, activities, and organizations have students recently started or grown? Have they updated any campus practices to better serve the current student population? What influence and impact do the students have in terms of a school newspaper, social media, and other communication channels?

Ultimately, the feelings of immersion and connection that form the foundation of your college culture are what provide students with a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves, and those emotions are incredibly powerful. Likewise, knowing that your institution is committed to empowering today’s students to create tomorrow’s traditions and effect lasting change is equally important when prospects are considering where they’ll best be able to find their best academic and formative fit. By showcasing what’s especially unique about your school, you can give your prospects a taste of what it might be like to be part of your college community while also reinforcing what it is about your school that makes it unlike any other.

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THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 250 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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